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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

In search of water and shade

Travelling to Wadi Mudbah, near Buraimi, to find a deserted and enchanting gorge to splash about in

Starting today, Motoring brings you a monthly guide to exploring the wilds of the UAE and Oman. **Paolo Rossetti**, an off-road enthusiast and a long-time resident of Al Ain, will show you the beauty of the back country and how to get there – and home – safely

It is October, and the temperature is starting to cool but the sun can still be fierce, so our destination will be one with both water and shade – Wadi Mudbah, on the outskirts of Buraimi.

About an hour from Al Ain, it can nicely fit into a day trip; combined with either a hike or an exploration of the surrounding area, it can be a wonderful overnight destination.

We will start our journey from the Hili Border Crossing (waypoint 1) on the northern face of the town of Al Ain. This is the entry into Buraimi, Oman, so remember your passports.

From Dubai, the best way to reach the Hili Border Crossing is to take the first Al Ain roundabout left. From Abu Dhabi, it is easier to take the first Al Ain exit (signposted Salammat) and avoid the Al Ain roundabout maze altogether, instead taking the ring road past the airport.

Once through the border, proceed straight until the old, restored fort and its busy, traditional market appear on the right (waypoint 2). The market is full of dates and plants, and the covered souq beside it has meats and fish (straight from the Indian Ocean) as well as spices and even an interesting antique shop. Beside that is a fresh fruit and vegetable market, also covered from the sun.

Here, we normally look for a succulent watermelon, which I will float in the cool, shaded pools of our destination before sharing it with friends. If in season, Buraimi's fresh dates are renowned, especially the ones called *mos-nos* (literally: half-half) which are fresh and a pale yellow in colour: firm and ripening at one end and soft and oh-so-sweet at the other.

When leaving the fort area from the main entrance road (the same you came in with), aim to drive straight through all roundabouts heading east out of town. When you reach the first intersection without a roundabout, after a speed bump, hang a left (north) followed by the first right (east) to join the main motorway that leads to Sohar.

It is not a divided highway, so please adapt your driving style. In the Toyota Land Cruiser VXR I'm driving, the tarmac is devoured with almost over-confidence that is both luxuriant and unnervingly calm – it was easy to go faster than you think you are. This can be dangerous, because even the mighty Land Cruiser must ultimately obey the laws of physics, no matter how solid and powerful it feels on the road.

After passing a Maha petrol station on your right, you will see a solitary hillock on the left side of the highway (waypoint 3) – on the top of this mountain, there is a fabulous 360-degree viewpoint. But I must now warn that advanced off-roading skills will be required to navigate the steep and deteriorating track that climbs up its eastern slope. The last thing I want is for an inexperienced driver in an all-wheel-drive vehicle to roll off the cliff!

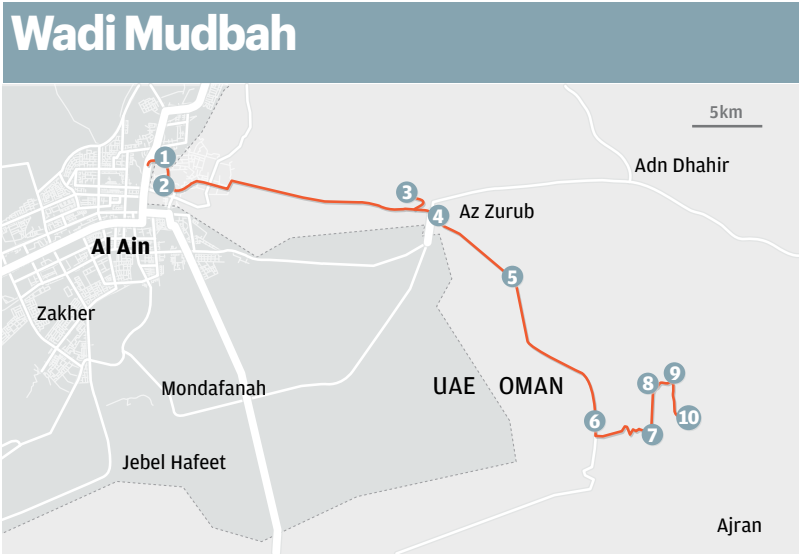
Should you feel you have the 4x4 experience and skills required for the climb to the summit, and an appropriate vehicle, then by all means take your decision; if you are unsure, why not take a walk up instead – nothing wrong with a little leg stretching.

The Land Cruiser VXR is the V8 engine version, and it is a big, heavy truck. I looked carefully at the ground clearance, and was not particularly impressed. The low stance that allows for a superb highway ride is now a hindrance, and I was a bit worried I would drag the chassis (and worse, the plastic bumpers) over the large rocks on the trail ahead. To make matters worse, recent rains had washed out parts of the track, leaving deep channels.

In fact, the Land Cruiser climbed



Be sure to drop a stone in the wadi pools before you swim, it will help scare off any Wadi Racer snakes. They are harmless and not at all interested in biting you and will soon disappear once given warning. Paolo Rossetti for The National



Jun de la Cruz / The National

up the trail with the sure-footedness of a goat. It might seem a bit soft in shape, but there is nothing soft about its four-wheel-drive traction. The central-locking differential ensured each wheel worked together, even on the loose shale. The uphill/downhill electronic control helped keep the ascent manageable. And the 5.7L, 381hp V8 was more than enough for power. We just kept the A/C on and relaxed in comfort in-

side – except for my wife, who was volunteered to play spotter for us so we wouldn't have to return the car with the rear plastic bumper in the boot!

Returning to the highway, head through the V-cut you'll see through the mountains, and then straight through the roundabout, following the sign to Hafit. The road snakes around to the right, passing by some active farms (waypoint 4) and

the alluvial plain for the sharp naked mountains you see on your left (waypoint 5). Eventually, you will come across a blue signpost signalling the turn left towards Wadi Mudbah (waypoint 6).

Here the asphalt ends and a well-used dirt track heads straight towards the mountain range. On these tracks, it is usual to maintain a fairly fast pace, to keep the wheels bouncing over the washboard bumps and not falling within them, resulting in spine-shattering vibrations that can send your dentures bouncing out of your mouth. The Land Cruiser's independent suspension ironed out the track, so we could proceed at a leisurely pace. Since you are now sharing one lane with oncoming traffic, it is a good habit to honk your approach before any blind curves, just to make sure you warn the speeding old, rusty farm truck that could be heading towards you.

As the track winds towards the mountains, be prepared for a very clear junction, where you will turn left, or north (waypoint 7) and then swing right again at the first turn-off (waypoint 8) to slip around the mountain range and get behind it, where you will continue along a smaller track towards the right/south (waypoint 9).

* how to: drive rocky inclines



Gravity is the boss

The incline suddenly seems a lot steeper than you had anticipated, and the track gradually deteriorates until the rocks are the size of aggressive camel humps. Recent rains have washed out entire sections, and the surrounding sharp peaks crowd around you ominously – you start having doubts about the sanity of the adventure.

In this instalment of off-road tips, we will focus on techniques for steep rocky climbs, like the one featured in the article on the way to Wadi Mudbah.

An early eye on the layout of the terrain is crucial to negotiating a steep incline on a dry, dusty track, and a quick but careful note of where downhill will lead if you slip, can help with your strategy.

A four-wheeled vehicle is much more stable when facing directly up or down, but when off-camber, or sideways across the slope, the situation can get tipsy very quickly.

So your first calculation must be the worst-case scenario – if the climb goes all wrong, and the wheels slip, and that rock comes loose, and I sneeze and my hat gets stuck over my eyes, where will I end up?

If the common sense part of your brain is screaming danger, then listen to it. There's nothing that forces you to attempt that obstacle other than perhaps a macho ego – and that can be quickly replaced by that split-second chill after the mishap, when you wish you could turn back time.

If you feel the climb is within your capabilities, and your worst-case scenario is within your risk management (scrape the bumper slightly, versus roll down that 20m escarpment and explode into

flames) then go ahead and engage the low-gear ratio.

The transfer case in your 4x4 directs power (torque) to both front and rear axles, and it hopefully has a "Lo" and a "Hi" setting. If it doesn't, then you have an all-wheel-drive car and should not attempt challenging off-road tracks.

The "Lo" setting's reduced gears slow down the vehicle and increase the torque available at each wheel, and will help you maintain traction both climbing up or down.

With one eye on the obstacle ahead and one on both sides of the car, and another on each wheel placement, you can begin your climb. If you have only two eyes, then perhaps convincing an enthusiastic spotter to walk with your vehicle would be a good idea. For me, this task falls to my wonderful wife and partner of 20 years, and I can only wish you similar luck and foresight in spousal selection.

The ideal climb is one where you do not stop the vehicle, but slowly inch your way up and over all rocks, loose shale, gutters and bumps, trying to always keep contact between rubber and earth.

If you do have to stop, engage the handbrake and never move into a neutral gear. Starting off again will require a very smooth application of power in order to prevent the wheels slipping.

This is the actual danger of such terrain. As long as the wheels maintain traction, the driver will have control over the direction and speed of the vehicle; but when the wheels slip, the direction is determined by gravity.

And gravity rather unapologetically always heads downhill.

* Paolo Rossetti

Where the trail becomes a stream of rounded rocks, the way I prefer to travel over them is to engage low-range in first gear and then allow the car to slowly crawl over the rocks. This way, each wheel can maintain traction and allow the suspension to roll over each rock, rather than absorbing bumps by travelling too fast. The car's cabin should remain more or less stable as a result.

When the trail opens up into a plateau, you will be approaching the destination (waypoint 10). Take due care, because in front of you will be a deep canyon, and if it's dark, or if you are not paying attention, or you are playing rally driver, then you will seriously regret it.

As you park your car, remove all valuables and proceed to the edge of the gorge, down a well-used path. Swing down to the left and follow the gorge until a low and easy passage across the gurgling brook presents itself. Then immediately turn right and follow back until you come across what can only be described as a living miracle: three gorgeous pools of fresh-running water, separated by waterfalls.

Take a moment to contrast this source of life with the surrounding hostile terrain: water is life, and not only for you and the people who live

downstream, but also numerous animal species. I beg that you take each and every piece of rubbish out with you. I was there a few weeks ago and there was not one empty water bottle, not one tissue, not one discarded plastic bag – you can see from the photos just what an idyllic spot this is. Please do not ruin such a beautiful place with rubbish.

The water is clean and fresh, and a swim is obligatory. Throw a couple of rocks into the pools before jumping in, as I have twice encountered a non-poisonous snake called a Wadi Racer, which is not at all interested in biting you and will quickly disappear when it knows of your presence.

The water runs down a second waterfall into a tighter gorge, and then disappears into a sink hole, to re-emerge at the bottom of the wadi.

I have visited this spot perhaps twenty times over the past ten years, and we have always been the only group there. However, with local customs in mind, it is only fair to dress with modesty and behave respectfully. We are guests of both nature and the country of Oman, and our passage must be dignified to ensure we remain welcome.

I hope you enjoy the trip. Next month, we'll travel south of Al Ain to the high sand dunes of Al Wagan.